

Tideline



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The Story of Bair Island

By Doug Cordell

"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world," Margaret Mead wrote. "Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

Nothing illustrates the point better than the story of Bair Island. Thanks largely, in fact, to the efforts of a small, dedicated group of Bay Area citizens, the island — 3,000 acres of former wetlands in the southwest reaches of the San Francisco Bay, twice the size of the Presidio — is protected today from development and poised for a major restoration that will provide critical wildlife habitat, improve public access and offer new opportunities for environmental education.

On July 14, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service recognized the local heroes who fought so long and hard to save Bair Island. In a morning ceremony on the island, with scores of their partners and supporters in attendance, Mendel Stewart, manager of the San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge Complex, dedicated a plaque honoring the Friends of Redwood City—and, in particular, Carolyn and Ralph Nobles—for "igniting the spark that saved these baylands for future generations."

The work of the Nobles and their colleagues to save Bair Island—work that spanned several decades—is a valuable lesson in perseverance and the enduring power of grassroots environmentalism.

The History

Like most of the land around the San Francisco Bay, Bair Island was once a wetland habitat teeming with life. At one time,

the Bay held the largest inter-tidal, wetland habitat on earth—an ecosystem that is exceeded only by coral reefs in the volume of life forms it supports. Today, though, the Bay is a third smaller than it was when wetlands were first filled to create dry land. Surveys have found that only 10 percent of its original 195,000 acres of wetlands still exist.

as Inner, Middle and Outer Bair. For the next 20 years, the company used the area for salt evaporation ponds.

In 1973, Leslie Salt sold the land to Mobil Oil, which began to plan a large-scale development for the island. Meanwhile, however, there was a growing environmental awareness, in the Bay Area and beyond, of the critical value of wetlands, not only as



Left to right: Ralph Nobles, Doris Dahlgren, Philip LaRiviere, Florence LaRiviere, Robin Smith.

As was the case with many of those original wetlands, Bair Island was diked and drained years ago for agriculture. The island got its name in the 1920s from Fred Bair, who owned a house and raised cattle on the land. In the 1940s, the Leslie Salt company acquired the property and built levees that divided it into three sections—known today

vital wildlife habitat, but as natural filters of water and buffers against flooding.

Things came to a head in 1982, when Mobil Oil's real estate arm won approval from the Redwood City City Council to build what it proposed to call South Shores,

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a development of 20,000 homes, a shopping center and a corporate office complex on the island. At the time, Ralph Nobles was a nuclear physicist at the Lockheed laboratories in Palo Alto. He was also an avid boater, a hobby that had given him an appreciation and concern for the wildlife and natural habitats of the South Bay. Driven by that concern, he and his now late wife, Carolyn, joined other citizen-activists to fight the South Shores development project. They called themselves the Friends of Redwood City.

With little money, and despite being outspent by opponents more than 5-to-1, the Friends of Redwood City—joined by

Victory was short-lived, however. Seven years after the referendum on the South Shores project, Mobil Oil sold Bair Island to a Tokyo-based developer, Kumagai Gumi, raising fears of another development proposal.

Mobilizing once more, the Friends of Redwood City and their allies tapped oil spill compensation money administered by the Audubon Society to hire a public relations firm. The firm, in turn, placed a large ad in the western edition of the *New York Times*, knowing that the edition also appeared in Japan. The ad took the form of an open letter to Kumagai Taichiro, the head of Kumagai Gumi. It also featured a rare photo

example, the new wetland would more than double much-needed habitat available to the endangered California clapper rail, improving the odds for this shorebird's long-term survival.

The letter urged Mr. Kumagai to sell the property at a fair price to land preservationists and, “return Bair Island to the Bay’s natural ecosystem.” It also asked readers to join the fight by clipping an attached coupon and mailing it to the developer.

Within three weeks of the appearance of the open letter in the *Times*, Kumagai Gumi’s attorneys contacted agencies in the area and signaled a willingness to sell the land. At that critical juncture, the Peninsula Open Space Trust (POST), a non-profit land preservation organization, stepped in to purchase the property for \$15 million. POST then turned the land over to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and the California Department of Fish and Game, with an agreement that the land would be managed by FWS as part of the Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge.

The Restoration

Today, Bair Island is in the midst of a historic and full-scale restoration that will return the area to tidal marsh and aid the recovery of endangered species like the clapper rail and the salt marsh harvest mouse. It will also provide significant opportunities for wildlife-oriented public access.

Because of the substantial subsidence of land on Bair Island, dating back to its salt pond days, the restoration requires the importation of almost 1.5 million cubic yards of clean soil. The new soil will serve as a foundation for salt marsh plants that, in time, will take root on the island. Almost 300,000 cubic yards of soil have come from the dredging of the Port of Redwood City’s shipping channel—a beneficial re-use that not only aided the restoration but kept the dredged material out of the Bay and the ocean. More dirt is now being trucked to the island by the construction firm, Pacific States, through a public-private partnership with FWS that will save taxpayers millions of dollars.

Once the massive dirt fill is complete, the Refuge will breach the existing levees at strategic spots on Inner and Middle Bair Islands to restore natural tidal action. Over 400 acres of Outer Bair Island have already been restored to tidal flow by a breaching



Christine Padilla from Congresswoman Anna Eshoo's office presenting a certificate recognizing the Friends of Redwood City to Ralph Nobles

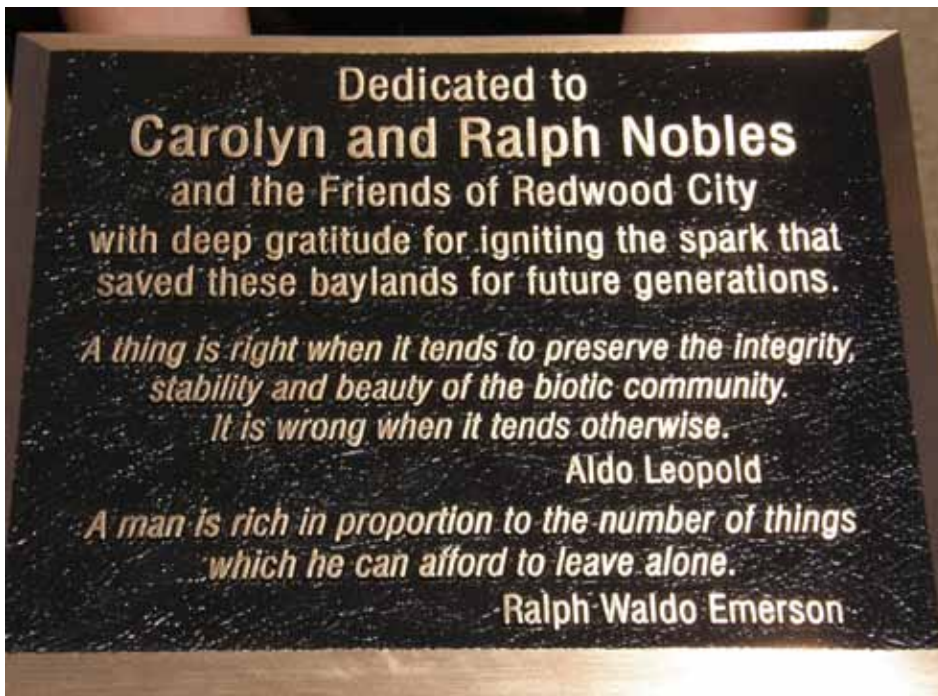
Save the Bay, the Citizens Committee to Complete the Refuge, the Bay Area chapters of the Audubon Society, and others—managed to lead a voter referendum drive that overturned the City Council’s approval of the proposed development on the island. Out of almost 18,000 votes cast, the measure to stop the development passed by a scant 42 votes.

“We pounded the pavement and walked the precincts,” says Sandra Cooperman, one of the original Friends of Redwood City, explaining how she and her allies were able to eke out a victory. “We were fighting with everything we had.”

of Mr. Kumagai, who had until this point managed to keep a low public profile both in the United States and Japan.

The open letter in the *Times* described Kumagai Gumi as, “a giant Japanese company headquartered in Tokyo [that] controls the fate of Bair Island, the single largest potential addition to the San Francisco Bay’s natural wetlands.” It advised Mr. Kumagai that:

If you agree to sell, the island would be added to the San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge. It would be restored to its natural state and again provide some of the best marsh for wildlife around the Bay. For



and ditch blocking operation managed by Ducks Unlimited—a 2009 project that returned the flow to historic slough channels.

As for public access, the levee trail route will be configured to extend around Inner Bair Island from one observation plat-

form to another, overlooking the breaches that will allow reconnection of tidal flow to the channel. The Refuge's parking lot on Bair Island Road will be expanded to allow more room for buses, to encourage field trips by local schools and other groups,

and a restroom facility will be added. A pedestrian bridge will also be constructed to connect the parking lot to the levee trail on the island. Funding for the bridge was recently approved by the California State Coastal Conservancy and Redwood City.

As a whole, the restoration project presents a model for other cooperative efforts elsewhere in the Bay Area—a unique partnership among federal, State and local agencies, together with non-profit organizations and the private sector, to realize an ambitious vision of conservation.

None of the impressive work already underway on Bair Island would have been possible, however, without the vision of a small band of hardy individuals. When the restoration is complete, and visitors can stroll across the pedestrian bridge and along the levee trail that borders flourishing wetlands, they will pass a plaque that tells them, in words set into bronze, about those intrepid souls: Carolyn and Ralph Nobles and the Friends of Redwood City.

Doug Cordell is the Public Affairs Officer for the San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge Complex.

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